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ABSTRACT

The integrated approach to facilitating student achievement undertaken by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) is described. The goal of SEDL's Programmatic Theme on Facilitating Student Achievement is to contribute to the improvement of programs and activities in the Southwestern Region for teaching reading, writing, and thinking skills by providing research and development-based information, training, and technical assistance concerning such efforts. Key objectives are to: (1) identify--via research and practice--strategies, approaches, and programs to enhance student achievement; (2) establish collaborations to build effective practice; (3) provide information, training, and technical assistance to help empower SEDL's collaborators to improve student achievement; and (4) disseminate information on knowledge and tools for improving student achievement. Among the key activities of the initiative will be three regional meetings to give training and assistance to SEDL collaborators. It is expected that a core of trained collaborators will be formed, to result in a more informed group of parent, educator, and community collaborators in the effort to improve student achievement. A series of papers on the issues of student achievement and a final report on the SEDL effort are planned. (SLD)

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CRITICAL ISSUES IN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

An Integrated Approach to Facilitating Student Achievement

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An Integrated Approach to Facilitating Student Achievement

Introduction

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) is a private, non-profit corporation established in 1966 as a regional laboratory under contract with the [then] U.S. Office of Education to serve the states of Louisiana and Texas. Today, its regional educational laboratory contract is with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) for working with the states of Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas.

As a regional educational laboratory, SEDL is one of nine similar institutions across the United States that works with and through state-level agencies and/or state-wide organizations to stimulate and support research-based improvements in elementary and secondary education.

Regional educational laboratory contracts primarily focus on school improvement support activities at various levels, providing technical assistance and linkages with the most current work of educational researchers in a wide variety of issue/concern areas on the part of education professionals and decision-makers. When existing research is not able to satisfy regional needs, the laboratories conduct applied research and develop specific tools and products. But their OERI-sponsored work is more generally characterized by identifying and collecting resources, synthesizing research results, and providing these materials, along with training and/or technical assistance to personnel in state agencies, associations, and organizations that work directly with schools. The laboratories also target a variety of similar information and services to state-level decisionmakers. For the most part, regional laboratory contracts do not provide for direct services to schools or local education agencies, except for specific, limited research or for demonstration sites.

Background

At the heart of SEDL's regional laboratory service strategy is a commitment to addressing issues identified by educators, intermediaries, and decisionmakers in current and significant areas of need. SEDL's needs-sensing activities have documented that school reform in the region is coming to focus on student outcomes particularly **on achievement on**

standardized tests and on improvements in teaching and learning of reading, writing, and thinking skills.

Other SEDL needs-sensing results show a strong regional interest in pursuing the issues of student achievement and the effective teaching of reading, writing, and thinking skills through strategies involving uses of partnerships with parents and communities and uses of educational technology. In response to this regional interest and needs, SEDL has introduced a new Programmatic Theme: **Facilitating Student Achievement with Reading, Writing, and Thinking Skills; Partnerships; and Technology.**

Framework for Action

SEDL has undertaken an integrated approach to facilitate student achievement because learning is impacted by many different factors. These factors include

- the individual learner,
- the school and community context,
- and the wider social and economic milieu.

The presence of and interplay between these factors justifies SEDL's integrated approach to facilitating student achievement. A brief explication of the framework within which SEDL has couched its approach is presented in the following section.

Reform Mandates

> Each generation of Americans has outstripped its parents in education, in literacy, and in economic attainment. For the first time in the history of our country, the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach, those of their parents.[1]

With the 1983 publication of A Nation at Risk, the American conscience began to focus on the magnitude of the problem of low student achievement and the implications this poses for our

economic productivity and security. Low student achievement was evidenced by the following indicators:

- International comparisons of student achievement, completed a decade ago, reveal that on 19 academic tests American students were never first or second and, in comparison with other industrialized nations, were last seven times.

- Some 23 million American adults are functionally illiterate by the simplest tests of everyday reading, writing, and comprehension.

- About 13 percent of all 17-year-olds in the United States can be considered functionally illiterate. Functional illiteracy among minority youth many run as high as 40 percent.

- Average achievement of high school students on most standardized tests is now lower than 26 years ago when Sputnik was launched.

- Many 17-year-olds do not possess the "higher order" intellectual skills we should expect of them. Nearly 40 percent cannot draw inferences from written material; only one-fifth can write a persuasive essay; and only one-third can solve a mathematics problem requiring several steps.

- Business and military leaders complain that they are required to spend millions of dollars on costly remedial education and training programs in such basic skills as reading, writing, spelling, and computation.[2]

Directly or indirectly, student achievement underscores the reform mandates that were enacted following the publication of A Nation At Risk. Beginning with Arkansas's landmark efforts in 1983, state legislatures in SEDL's region enacted comprehensive education reform packages designed to address

the problems of low educational achievement and school improvement. The reform legislation in the Region can be divided into five categories, each of which at some point impacts student achievement as an important school improvement factor. These include: school/organization/structure; finance; school programs; education personnel; and education standards.

The educational reforms of the 1980's constitute responses to, and attention for, the in-school variables that affect student achievement. In considering the needs and realities of the learner, it is important neither to lose sight of the demographic characteristics of the youths, nor of their social and economic milieu.

In 1986, the national school-age population was 45.1 million. It is predicted that by the year 2000 this number will increase to 49.5 million.[3] Not only is the school-age population increasing numerically, it is also increasing racially and ethnically. Whereas one out of every four children in 1970 was minority, by 2000, one out of every three children will be minority.[4] The growing minority school-age population will be the new labor force in the twenty-first century.

Yet another social factor impinging upon the issue of student achievement is family structure. Because family structure is closely correlated to economic status, a brief overview into the changing family configuration is necessary.

Between 1970 and 1976, the number of two-parent families with children under 18 has substantially deceased. At the same time, the number of female-headed families with children has tripled.[5]

The economic implications of diverse family structures are staggering. Children in single-parent families are five times more likely to be living below the poverty level than are children living in two-parent households. In 1986, the median income for all two-parent household families was over $30,000. In contrast, the median income for a female-headed family was only $13,647. The changing family structure

affects all racial and economic groups. However, because of their growing numbers, the impact on poor and minority children is even more staggering. Families living in poverty increased by more than 25% between 1975 and 1985. Within the same decade, due to federal cutbacks in social programs, the number of people receiving government assistance declined somewhat.

Children enrolled in schools today will become the labor force of the twenty-first century. These children will not only bear responsibility for rearing their offspring but also for contributing to the care of a large elderly population. This factor alone merits careful consideration on the part of those shaping educational policy. Because the broader social and economic factors pose serious challenges to improving student achievement, classroom instruction will need to focus more directly on the three key areas -- reading, writing and thinking skills -- that are the foundation of all academic learning, and the basic skills needed in an information society. As Costa contends, "In a society engulfed in information, the ability to reason is essential to make the decisions and solve the problems we each face daily."[7]

Another aspect of the emerging information society is the growing evidence that learning increases when a variety of instructional methods are used. Having a greater variety of methods addresses a wider range of learning styles of students. This move to a broader range of instructional methods can be facilitated by bringing partnerships and technology into the classroom. Parental, business, community involvement, and information technologies (computers, video, interactive hook-ups, etc.) have the potential to enrich as well as expand classroom instruction.

In sum, facilitating student achievement is a fundamental goal of educational reform. Educational findings continue to reveal that students are not learning to their utmost potential. While schools have improved within the past five years, the improvements have been limited.[8] From SEDL's perspective,

facilitating student achievement in the basic areas of reading, writing and thinking skills represents the major goal for school improvement. And because of changing social and economic conditions, the integration of reading, writing and thinking skills will be essential to ensuring students' ability to succeed in an information society. Including an emphasis on these three skill areas, in addition to partnerships and technology with respect to enhancing student achievement, represents a compelling rationale for such educational actions by SEDL because:

- reading is considered to be integral to most of all of our effective life activities;
- writing is thought to be one of the two requisite communication forms;
- thinking is critical to being successful at idea/ thought processing;
- partnerships are unique opportunities to engage other stakeholders in making schools successful;
- technology brings variety of instructional resources which provide the means for expanding the teaching/learning process.

These reasons, in relation to expressed SEDL regional concerns by key stakeholders about improving student achievement, form the basis for the Theme E focus and scope of work.

STRATEGIES FOR ACTION

Goal

The goal of SEDL's Programmatic Theme on Facilitating Student Achievement is to contribute to the improvement of programs/activities in the Southwestern Region for teaching reading, writing and thinking skills by providing research and

development-based information, training, and/or technical assistance concerning such efforts for facilitating student achievement through a variety of strategies, including uses of partnerships and technology.

Key Objectives

(1) To identify from research and practice promising strategies, approaches and/or programs that can enhance student achievement with reading, writing and thinking skills; community/parent partnerships; and technology.

(2) To establish collaborations with selected staff members of agencies, organizations, associations, and with others who can help translate research-based knowledge and tools into effective practice in SEDL's region to impact student achievement with reading, writing and thinking skills; partnerships; and technology.

(3) To provide information, training, and technical assistance that will empower SEDL's collaborators to help facilitate student achievement with reading, writing and thinking skills; partnerships; and technology.

(4) To disseminate information on research-based knowledge and tools for improving student achievement with reading, writing, and thinking skills; partnerships; and technology to a range of regional audiences.

SEDL staff members will provide individualized technical assistance and training to a select number of regional collaborators. These efforts will take place in three annual regional meetings.

Key Activities

- The first meeting to be held in late 1988 or early 1989, will enable SEDL and regional collaborators to develop individualized, site-specific action plans (including evaluation

procedures) to facilitate student achievement with reading, writing, and thinking skills; partnerships; and technology.

- The second regional meeting is scheduled for summer, 1989, and will take the form of a Reading,Writing, and Thinking Skills Academy at which regional collaborators will be provided with (a) critical information in the three topic areas and (b) the opportunity to hone skills that can enhance the facilitation of student achievement. In addition, participants will have the opportunity to revise their individualized action plans.

- The third and final regional meeting will occur in 1990 and will allow each regional collaborator to (a) evaluate and assess the efficacy of the programmatic effort; (b) to finalize documentation of this process; and (c) to establish self-sustaining action plans to maintain and expand efforts to facilitate student achievement with reading, writing, and thinking skills.

Outcomes

SEDL's initiative to facilitate student achievement with reading, writing, and thinking skills; partnerships; and technology will result in the following:

- A highly-trained cadre of collaborators able to provide direct services to teachers and others in the facilitation of student achievement with reading, writing, and thinking skills; partnerships; and technology.

- A more informed group of educational, parental, and business/community collaborators.

- A series of Student Achievement Updates, Critical Issues Papers, a major synthesis document on what works in facilitating student achievement

with reading, writing, and thinking skills; partnerships; and technology, and a final document detailing the process for establishing cooperative partnerships that can help facilitate student achievement.

* For additional information contact Dr. David L. Williams, Jr., Assistant Executive Director, Resources for School Improvement, SEDL.

1. Paul Copperman, as quoted in: National Commission on Excellence in Education. A Nation at Risk. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office. p. 11. 1983.

2. Ibid., pp. 8-9.

3. U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1984, Current Population Reports, *Projections of the Population of the United States by Age, Sex, and Race: 1983-2080*, Series P-25, no. 952, Table E.

4. Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. From Minority to Majority: Education and the Future of the Southwest Region. Boulder, CO: 1987.

5. U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1987. Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 419, "Household and Family Characteristics: March, 1986." U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., Table A.

6. Unpublished paper commissioned by the National Education Association. "Changing Demographic and Social Characteristics of America's School Age Population." December, 1987.

7. Arthur L. Costa, ed. Developing Minds: A Resource Book for Teaching Thinking. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. 1985.

8. William J. Bennet, American Education: Making it Work. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office. 1988.

Future Focus

The four future issues will feature programs that measure their success in student achievement.

- An Integrated Framework of Student Achievement: Three Dimensions
- Facilitating Student Achievement: The School Dimension
- Facilitating Student Achievement: The Student Dimension
- Facilitating Student Achievement: The Community Dimension

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